

## SPECIAL ISSUE OF SPECIAL ISSUES: 20 YEARS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING & TECHNOLOGY

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### INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the first issue of *Language Learning & Technology* (*LLT*) was published with a focus on original research and conceptual frameworks connecting issues of language learning and teaching with various technologies. The journal was ahead of its time in a number of ways, particularly because it was completely online long before this mode of publishing was attempted or even valued in scholarly venues. In fact, for many years there was still a significant bias against such publications within the conventions of academia, which in recent years seems to be shifting in the opposite direction in favor of online venues for sharing scholarly work. In spite of these early challenges, *LLT* persevered and quickly rose in the conventional scholarly rankings. Recent statistics from Google Scholar show that the median number of citations per article is 62, with an average number of citations per article of 91. Researchers in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) anticipate that these numbers will continue to rise as interest in educational technology continues to flourish.

In celebration of its 20-year anniversary, *LLT* is releasing this special issue. We, the three special issue editors, considered a variety of options for the special issue format. We could create an issue dedicated to the topics of the most downloaded articles, most frequently cited articles, or the most seminal articles from *LLT*. We could choose articles that focused upon any of the diverse themes included in the journal over these last 20 years. We could have opened a call for papers reflecting on the past twenty years. The options were limitless. It was not obvious how we could best represent this milestone.

We discussed a variety of potential topics for the 20th anniversary special issue with the editorial board. After all, we could focus on any of the various areas that had been addressed in any of the previous 54 issues of the journal. We considered revisiting the inaugural issue, revisiting the 10 most influential articles, or focusing on expectations of the future twenty years. We also considered revisiting any one of the previous special issues, but this seemed far too limited to represent the rich diversity of research that has been included in this groundbreaking journal. Consequently, we ultimately agreed that it would be more interesting to revisit a range of the previous special issues and try to construct a special issue of special issues.

In order to identify which of the previous special issues we would incorporate, we gathered a variety of data about the previous 28 special issues published between 1997 and 2015. We accessed server records to compare the number of downloads that each of the special issues had. We then consulted with the editorial board to identify those contributions that were most influential. We also wanted to gather as much feedback as possible from the CALL community by using a crowdsourcing approach. Toward this goal, we conducted an online survey and invited the general readership of *LLT* to respond. We also surveyed the editorial board. We received 205 responses from the public survey and unanimous participation from the editorial board. We aggregated all of the data in order to determine the final focus on the following top contenders: second language acquisition, learner autonomy, assessment, and each of

the four skills areas (speaking, listening, writing, and reading). In particular, we identified significant interest in these special issues:

- Learner Autonomy and New Learning Environments (Vol. 15, Num. 3)
- The Role of Computer Technology in Second Language Acquisition Research (Vol. 3, Num. 2)
- The Role of Computer Technology in Second Language Acquisition Research (Vol. 4, Num. 1)
- Computer-Assisted Language Testing (Vol. 5, Num. 2)
- Technology and Listening Comprehension (Vol. 11, Num. 1)
- Technology and Learning to Read (Vol. 11, Num. 3)
- Technology and Learning to Write (Vol. 12, Num. 2)
- Technology and Oral Language Development (Vol. 9, Num. 3)

Because the interest across all four skills was relatively balanced, we combined those four areas into one theme, which narrowed our final decision to create a call for papers around these four areas: second language acquisition, learner autonomy, assessment, and the four skills areas. We stated that the top new research article in each of these areas would be published in this issue, with other publishable studies appearing in subsequent issues of *LLT*. We complemented the call for original empirical articles with several other sections: research review articles for each of the four main topic areas, invited commentaries about several of the most highly influential articles, and [two video interviews](#) from the initial advisory board members on the creation of *LLT*.

In the first study of this special issue, “The CALL-SLA Interface: Insights from a Second-Order Synthesis,” Plonsky and Ziegler offer a two-part article that begins with an inventory of the findings from meta-analyses and synthesis reviews of CALL and SLA research. In this section, they conduct a review of 14 meta-analyses and syntheses that cover 408 primary studies in order to explore the effect of different types of technology-mediated tools and contexts on L2 learner outcomes. In the second part, they take on the important task of analyzing how the methodologies that characterize current meta-analytic research in CALL (and in research more generally) might be strengthened in future research endeavors. Theirs is a rigorous and invigorating deep-dive into the growing quantitative research base on SLA and CALL. They provide practical and well-grounded advice for moving the field forward on this front.

There was no article accepted in the assessment category, so next two articles are both situated within the theme of the four skills areas. In the first of these, “Teaching the Pragmatics of Russian Conversation Using a Corpus-Referred Website,” Furniss focuses on the impact of a web-based instructional intervention on the development of learners’ awareness of Russian phrases that carry pragmatic functions. Using a quasi-experimental pre-, post-, and delayed post-test design, she found a positive impact on the awareness of certain pragmatic formulas. In Hardison and Okuno’s study, “Perception-Production Link in L2 Japanese Vowel Duration: Training with Technology,” the focus is on how technology might enhance learners’ ability to perceive aural input and their transfer of these perceptions to their own verbal output. Technology was used to provide a visual waveform display of various speech forms for one of the three groups, while another group received only audio input and a control group received no intervention. Their findings include support for a link between the subjects’ perception and production and also for a need to consider other contextual variables. Both articles exemplify the type of skills-focused quantitative experimental work that characterizes the important role *LLT* has served in disseminating findings that accrue over time in the careful documentation of well-positioned research questions and methodologies.

The final empirical contribution of this special issue is situated within the theme of autonomy and, because it examines autonomy within the context of a skills-based instructional approach, it provides a solid bookend to the other three pieces that also explore different angles on the four skills. In “Autonomous Learning through Task-Based Instruction in Fully Online Language Courses,” Lee analyzes a variety of data sources including participant reflections, surveys, and interviews to explore the different affordances that were made available to learners in a web-based repository of skill-integrated tasks and

digital tools. She provides a carefully contextualized account of the different ways that task structures, personal commitment levels, and instructor involvement are manifested in different levels of interaction and autonomy.

Turning to the four review articles, Chun's contribution is a tour de force that draws on an extremely wide range of examples of how SLA and CALL have been explored over the last 20 years. The breadth covered by her review echoes the early goals set forth in the inaugural issue, where she and other early contributors sought to define the initial research agenda for *LLT*. Inspired by this early goal, Chun provides a comprehensive synthesis of the paths that have been taken by researchers since that launch two decades ago. She discusses how SLA research and CALL have been combined in many ways that allow for technology to serve as a tool for conducting research and also as a tool for learning and teaching languages. Her review offers a thoughtful approach to cataloging the wide variety of SLA research conducted with CALL. She includes two informative tables that categorize, first, the ways in which SLA theories have been operationalized with various technologies, and second, the types of learning outcomes that have been fostered by technology tools. Her review emphasizes the ever-expanding foci within SLA and CALL research—from its early eye on developing the four skills areas within primarily interactionist, usage-based, and skills-based approaches, to its contemporary lens that extends to pragmatics, intercultural awareness, and digital literacies. She concludes by underscoring the current trends toward understanding “ecological CALL,” with its focus on new modes and contexts in which learners can develop symbolic competence and global citizenship.

The retrospective review of the last 20 years of research on technology and second language assessment by Chapelle and Voss is based on a systematic process of identifying 25 papers published in the last 20 years in *LLT* that met several inclusion criteria. Because the review represents every genre within *LLT* (articles, book and software reviews, and commentaries), it offers a thorough analysis of how this topic has progressed empirically and pedagogically. They suggest that the majority of research on assessment in CALL has tended to cluster around issues in two main areas: efficiency and innovation. Throughout the review, they point to ways that more traditional views of assessment have been complemented and extended by innovations in both technological tools as well as in the approaches researchers have taken. They end with a reminder of the relatively small amount of research guiding ways that more traditional views of assessment have been both complemented as well as extended by technological and methodological innovations.

Between 2007 and 2009 there was a series of special issues focused on the traditional four skills. Not having enough space to include an article on each of these skills, we chose to include a review across the four skills. Robert Blake presents an overview for CALL practice with a focus on task-based language teaching that integrates the four skills in a manner that resembles the way learners use new technologies in their daily lives. He also notes that the contemporary multimodal nature of CALL can help promote language production across of a variety of digital contexts. Research in this area has a particular focus on how learners use these contexts and tools with greater learner agency and autonomy.

The last review of this section is by Reinders and White, who present an overview of the last 20 years of research on the role of autonomy in language learning, an area that has increased in importance in recent years to become what they term an *assumed goal* in language teaching. They observe the increasingly complex relationship between language teaching, CALL, and learner autonomy across the autonomy literature over these past two decades. By organizing these observations into five themes (learner training and strategies, teacher autonomy, self-access and language advising, telecollaboration, and social technologies for learning), the authors present an insightful synthesis of research on autonomy that continues to grow in importance in CALL.

Finally, this issue contains seven commentaries which were elicited from scholars whose articles have been among the most highly cited (between 360 and 600 citations) in the last 20 years. These researchers

were invited to submit a commentary on their research focus with a lens toward the past and the future. They were asked to reflect on what motivated the original research in terms of the core problem and the context of CALL technology at the time. These commentaries also discuss the main intellectual and practical contributions of their works, how their works helped shape the field, and what progress has since been made. They each look ahead to the future to inspire continuing research in the area.

In the introduction to the opening issue in July 1997, the founding *LLT* editor Mark Warschauer wrote:

*Language Learning & Technology* features both a message and a medium. The message is that the use of computers and other new technologies has now moved to the mainstream of language education; research and theory are thus needed more than ever to ensure that new technologies are used wisely and effectively. As reflected in the title of our journal, our focus is to put language learning first; technology will be considered not from a technical point of view, but rather as to how its use impacts the process of teaching and learning languages.... The medium is the World Wide Web. (p.1)

From its inception, *LLT* has endeavored to use the Web to provide high-quality research, reviews, and commentaries—all open access—to an international audience seeking to understand what happens when technology mediates the language learning process and how that understanding might be applied to improve language teaching and learning. We hope you find the content of this 20th anniversary issue in line with that pioneering philosophy.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Philip Hubbard is Senior Lecturer in Linguistics and Director of English for Foreign Students in the Stanford University Language Center. An associate editor of *LLT*, he has published and presented widely in various areas of language learning and technology, most recently in listening, teacher education, content curation, and CALL theory.

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